



Review: [Untitled]

Reviewed Work(s):

Jiri Menzel and the History of the Closely Watched Trains by Josef S#kvorecky
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The most illuminating part of the book is the long interview with Hill that concludes it. Hill emerges as a thoughtful and articulate man with strongly held views, particularly on the status of the director (he thinks it's been absurdly inflated by the auteurs).

The interview apart, there is little in the book that brings one closer to an understanding of how Hill's directorial choices created the significant commentaries on the American experience that Shores claims to see in his films.

—JAMES BERNARDONI

JIRI MENZEL AND THE HISTORY OF THE CLOSELY WATCHED TRAINS

By Josef Škvorecký. New York: Columbia University Press, 1983.

Josef Škvorecký's short (100 pages) book touches on many matters besides its ostensible subject of the way in which an "underground" and politically controversial story by Bohumil Hrabal was successively reworked to become Jiří Menzel's highly successful and virtually apolitical film. Put as bluntly as this, and keeping in mind the fact that Menzel, almost alone among the major Czech directors of the sixties, not only chose to stay in his native country, but has been able to produce films at regular intervals since, it might seem that we are to be dealing with an account of compromise, failure of nerve, and even opportunism. Škvorecký, however, who has of course the advantage of having enjoyed personal and professional contact with all the people whose work he discusses, is not willing to settle for easy moral judgments or condemnations, and his book becomes a fascinating study of the range of choices available to an artist in such circumstances as the Czechoslovakia of the sixties and seventies, and the way in which individuals responded to these choices.

Anyone who has attempted to study Eastern European cinema with even a modicum of first-hand knowledge of the situation can easily recognize the world of Škvorecký's first chapter in which he discusses the various signals and codes by which an artist can conform to official guidelines and yet send out messages that initiates at least can understand. To take an example from my own recent experience of Hungarian cinema: the casting by the much-banned Gyula Gazdag of Evald Schorm, the

uncompromising conscience of the Czech cinema, in the main role of his *Singing of the Treadmill* represented a gesture of support that doubtless helped to account for the banning of that film from 1974–1984; whereas the casting of Menzel himself as the main actor in Gyula Maar's elegantly vapid *Passing Fancy* reinforces the fact that this particular film is entirely devoid of any political awareness whatever. Menzel, in fact, emerges from Škvorecký's portrait of him, and despite the many compromises and even recantations that he has made in order to continue working, as something very different from the classic time-serving official artist (represented in the book by Otakar Vávra) who is ready to shift his ideological position to suit every whim of his political masters; rather, he appears as a genuine political innocent whose only concern is to be left alone to make films on the one subject that truly obsesses him: sex.

The changes then that moved Hrabal's original story from its "morbid" and "pessimistic" origins as *The Legend of Cain* to the rather more light-hearted tragicomedy of its published version as the novella *Closely Watched Trains*, to a script and then a film that shifted the emphasis almost entirely toward the theme of sexual frustration and incidentally cleared up the Conrad-like narrative complexities of the book to provide a more straightforward and accessible story—all these involved, in Škvorecký's view, as many gains as they did losses. In his own words: ". . . it is an excellent, perhaps great film, although it may have distorted an excellent novella." Later he writes that it is "a film miles away from the original black story of Cain, and much different from the tragicomedy of the novel—but a film with subtle complexities of its own, beautifully executed, revealing the visible reality of a small corner of the world, and demonstrating the universal reality of man's joyfully dirty masculine soul through its fine script and actors."

Škvorecký is too skeptical (and perhaps too humane) to take the line advocated both by many armchair watchers of the Eastern European film scene and by such genuinely radical spirits as still survive under such regimes as the Czech one, which insists that the only worthwhile films are those in which the director lays his or her head on the block with a deliberately provocative subject or stylistic

treatment each time out. Certainly some directors seem to flourish by working in this way, and it is impossible not to admire the courage with which others refuse to take the path of Menzel (and Hrabal too, who not only offered a public recantation but denounced and attacked his former associates) and doggedly insist in working in a way that satisfies their own conscience, or else remaining silent. Different people make different choices, as Škvorecký points out, and not all of them are dishonorable. Some choose to go into exile; some refuse all compromise and choose silence; some are forced into silence against their will; and some make what they see as necessary compromises in order that some voices at least, that are not totally at the service of the official viewpoint, may continue to be heard. The whole melancholy process, which has dominated Czech cinema for the past fifteen years, can now be seen working itself out, in virtually identical fashion, in Poland.

The book ends with a glimmer of hope in its discussion of Menzel's recent *Short Cut*, which Škvorecký sees as a genuinely personal film and one with which Menzel, without directly challenging official orthodoxies, nevertheless "returned home." If Menzel is a survivor, however, the true heroine of this book is Věra Chytilová, whose open letter to the Czech President asking him to put an end to the campaign of persecution against her and to allow her to continue making the kind of films she had shown herself equipped and qualified to make, is printed as an appendix. There is no grovelling here, no apologetics, no pleading, no promises to reform, no doubletalk, no disowning of her own previous work—simply a dignified listing of the facts of her career and an account of the appallingly petty, jealous, cowardly, and vindictive accusations and actions taken against her. Her boldness paid off to the extent that she was allowed to complete *The Apple Game* in 1977, but since then she too has been silent. If Škvorecký's account is correct, Menzel is perhaps lucky that he, in all honesty, has no political integrity to defend: his talents are not being utterly squandered or suppressed and he can make some films, at any rate, of which he need not feel ashamed. It may not be much, but in the current desert of the Czech cinema, it is at least something.

—GRAHAM PETRIE

LUCHINO VISCONTI

By Claretta Tonetti. Boston: Twayne, 1983. \$24.00.

For once someone who speaks Italian and knows the culture well is writing on Italian cinema. All too many otherwise astute critics must rely on subtitles for their experience of a film, and thus necessarily miss important subtleties. Consequently, they are often led to concentrate on "universal" themes about the "human condition" at the expense of historically and culturally determined particulars. The meaning of other details like music and visual motifs also often escapes these critics, and rarely is any attention paid to *Italian* critics and historians of Italian cinema (there are a lot of them). Tonetti, on the other hand, is able to quote revealingly from Visconti's dialogue, and she has also read at least some of the massive amount of scholarship on Visconti in Italian, citing it only occasionally, but in an illuminating fashion. We also learn from her helpful cultural tidbits, such as the fact that, in Sicily, the basil plant which stands on the windowsill in *La Terra Trema* during the conversation between the policeman and the young girl symbolizes sexual temptation. Tonetti is also very good at placing this film and others in the often overlooked context of Italian fiction, and her discussion of Italian dialects is informative—though one wonders whether it was necessary to go back as far as the Roman Empire. Similarly, she usefully puts *Senso* in the context of *Risorgimento* history, but her recitals are rather pedestrian, and given the obvious space limitations the book suffers from, perhaps longer than they need to be for the purpose at hand.

However, if Tonetti knows a lot about Italy, she knows next to nothing about film. Given the fact that most books in the Twayne series begin with egregiously over-long author biographies, one is troubled by the fact that Tonetti's sketch mentions no previous work in film studies. This fear is borne out by the text, for she never mentions a film's editing, and only two or three times in the whole book does she ever refer to framing, camera movement or angle, and the like. (She displays no knowledge whatsoever of film terminology, referring in one instance to a "long distance camera shot.") Trained in literary studies,